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C O N F I D E N T I A L TEGUCIGALPA 001460

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TAGS: PREL PGOV PLAB TBIO SOCI HO

SUBJECT: MEDICINE MANIFESTO; CUBAN DOCTORS BRIGADE FACING UNCERTAIN FUTURE IN HONDURAS

Classified By: Acting DCM Paul Tuebner;
Reasons 1.5 (b) and (d).

¶1. (C) (SUMMARY) The Cuban Medical Brigade (CMB) was welcomed into Honduras with open arms in 1998, after the devastation of Hurricane Mitch. However, over the past seven years that welcome has been worn out, according to some government offices and the Honduran medical community (HMC). With the current leftist trends in the region, there is concern by the Government of Honduras (GOH) that the Cuban presence in the country, especially in rural poverty stricken areas may not be what the doctor ordered. The HMC, specifically the Honduran College of Medicine, feels the assistance of the CMB is no longer warranted or wanted. Recently, the GOH agreed that the Cuban doctors should leave. However, this decision is not set in stone. The Honduran Ministry of Health (HMH), the ultimate decision maker, still has not made a declaration as to whether the doctors will remain. (END SUMMARY)

¶2. (C) Following Hurricane Mitch the CMB entered the country as part of the international relief effort. They have maintained and increased their presence within the country via a bilateral agreement with Cuba. The agreement allows Hondurans to study at the Latin American Medical School in Cuba and allows Cuban doctors to serve rural areas of Honduras, where Honduran doctors refuse to go. It is estimated that Cuban doctors have conducted over seven million consultations since entering the country, while over 700 Hondurans have studied in Cuba, a majority in the medical field. However, this program is neither free nor cheap. It is estimated that annually the HMH spends 14 million lempiras to maintain the program.

¶3. (C) The significant number of Cuban doctors in the country has caused concern for two major and very different reasons. First, there is a concern that, in addition to treating the sick, the doctors are spreading their ideology in the rural and poverty stricken areas of the country. It has been reported that part of CMB's mission is to promote the Cuban/communist ideology, especially to the poor masses. Wall Street Journal senior editorial writer, Mary Anastasia O'Grady called the doctors, "Fidel's foot soldiers, with the potential for soft indoctrination." This is the cause of serious concern in the GOH, specifically with the Honduran Army, who feel that the Cuban presence could undermine government efforts in these areas.

¶4. (C) The second concern is that the Cuban doctors are taking positions that would otherwise be filled by Honduras' estimated six thousands doctors, 40% of which are currently unemployed. In addition, EmbOffs have been told by the Honduran Public Health sources that the Cuban doctors are not well trained, have little or no equipment/supplies and there have been numerous complaints about the quality of care received. On the other hand, a Honduran surgeon working off his debt in an internship/community service project in Mosquitia told a ConOff that he was thankful for the Cuban doctors and because of them he is able to take a vacation. The ConOff noted that overall he was positive about the efforts of the Cuban doctors and commented that they are doing lots of good work, mostly in poor areas, where Honduran doctors refuse to work. These positive sentiments seem to be shared by a majority of the Honduran people.

¶5. (C) The appreciation and respect for the Cuban doctors has made it difficult to remove them from the country. This is not the first attempt to have the CMB removed from the country. In 1999, a similar but unsuccessful attempt was made. According to local newspaper sources, President Maduro has distanced himself from the issue by saying the decision whether the CMB remain in Honduras is solely up to the HMH. Palmer